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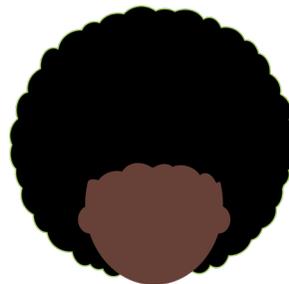


Support your Black
workforce, now

**Practical ideas for organizations and
leaders to take action**

About the cover art

The cover illustration is a loose depiction of Blackness. As a whole, we as Black people have been accustomed to living in a type of parallel universe, an existence unique to only Black people. With the use of technology and social media, more people are able to witness some of these differences. The image on the cover could represent a mother, father, child, coworker, or even myself. The natural Black afro symbolizes the embrace of the beauty of Blackness in the workplace while challenging a frequent bias that perceives Black features as unprofessional. Black Lives Matter is a loving affirmation. Black Lives Matter.



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Racial inequity is far from new, but a global pandemic and several recent instances of violence toward Black people in the United States have illuminated and magnified racial disparities with extraordinary fervor. The reprehensible murders of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, and Ahmaud Arbery are just a few of the recent events that are representative of the systemic racism and bias facing Black people inside and outside of the workplace every day, highlighting the need for organizations and their leaders to better support their Black workforce, especially in this moment.

Racism against the Black community is not new—and it has long been present in the workplace

According to the National Museum of African American History and Culture, “racism takes several forms and works most often in tandem with at least one other form to reinforce racist ideas, behavior, and policy.”¹ Individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism together form a system, referred to herein as “systemic racism” or “racism.”

Briefly contextualizing the Black experience today, the history of anti-Black racism in America starts with the transatlantic slave trade between 1525 and 1866. From there, both overt and covert instances of discriminatory policies and beliefs permeated civics, education, health care, urban planning, public utilities, corporations, and more. Racism has plagued American society throughout history, from voting rights (for example, via the Three-Fifths Compromise) to education (such as segregation) and neighborhood zoning, from disproportionate access to health care and transportation to police brutality.² For hundreds of years, the compounding impact of a complex system of laws, policies, and behaviors disadvantaging Black people has presented barriers for the Black community not faced by most other identity groups in the same way. This system, in turn, generates more barriers (which can manifest as biases) in a self-perpetuating cycle.

Racism in America today



Today, racism against the Black community manifests throughout systems from childhood onward.

- Black women are 243 percent more likely to die in childbirth than White women, due to lack of access to sufficient health care³
- Black babies are twice as likely as White babies to die before their first birthday⁴
- Black people (22 percent) in America are twice as likely to experience poverty than White people (11 percent) or Asian people (10 percent)⁵
- Black students are suspended three times as often as their White peers, for similar behavior⁶
- Black workers are twice as likely to be unemployed as White workers (6.4 percent vs. 3.1 percent in 2019), equalizing for work experience and education. Even Black workers with a college degree are more likely to be unemployed than similarly educated White workers⁷
- In terms of median hourly earnings, Black men with a college degree earn 78 percent of what White men with a college degree earn for the same work. Black women earn 92 percent of the wages of similarly educated White women⁸
- Black individuals in America are 20 percent more likely to be pulled over while driving than White individuals⁹
- On average, Black men in the United States receive sentences that are 19.1 percent longer than those of White men convicted for the same crimes¹⁰

Black people also enter and exit the workforce in the context of this racist system. Studies show that when Black applicants “whiten” resumes, through removing references to race or even changing “Black-sounding” names to “White-sounding” names, they are more likely to receive interviews.¹¹ And such inequity extends throughout the talent life cycle—from hiring to promotions and more—to the highest levels of corporate leadership: In 2020, there were only four Black Fortune 500 CEOs, all men; there have only been two Black women to ever lead a Fortune 500 company.¹² And, in 2018, only 11.1 percent of Fortune 100 board members identified as Black.¹³

Once they enter the workplace, Black individuals face further barriers. In a Deloitte study on “covering”—that is, downplaying or hiding an aspect of one’s identity—79 percent of Black or African American individuals reported covering at work, compared with 61 percent of respondents overall and 45 percent of straight, White men. In the study, Black individuals shared that they were implicitly or explicitly expected by leaders and/or their employers’ culture to alter ways that they speak, dress, wear their hair, vocalize opinions, or socialize with others, “to fit into the mainstream” (that is, default) culture. In turn, the energy expended to actively change appearance, behaviors, or affiliations has a negative impact on feelings of belonging and psychological safety at work.¹⁴

While some organizations and leaders may now, for the first time, start to understand the racism facing Black people, it is not new. Black members of the workforce have succeeded despite such challenges. Now, imagine the *additional* burden of the ever-present horrific events facing the United States at this moment; this is the imperative for change and for action.

The additional impact of recent events on the Black workforce

The American Psychological Association recently declared that “we are living in a racism pandemic,” noting the heavy psychological toll (that is, trauma) recent murders have caused Black people.¹⁵ In addition to the inequities they have faced for decades (including inequities that may be compounded by the intersectionality of their multiple marginalized identities, such as being Black and a woman), the Black workforce is uniquely affected by current events, facing emotional trauma, fear for personal safety, doubts about belonging, and uncomfortable or hostile work environments:

- **Emotional trauma.** In the context of disproportionate COVID-19¹⁶ death rates and staggering and disproportionate job loss due to the recession sparked by COVID-19,¹⁷ Black colleagues are still expected to maintain productivity and high performance while simultaneously witnessing, processing, and grieving the murders of other Black people. This can lead to anxiety, fear, anger, and feelings of futility, which is often covered in the workplace.

- **Fear for personal safety.** America has seen Black people victimized while doing everyday tasks—exercising, bird watching, and sitting at home.¹⁸ The ever-present knowledge of these incidents and dangers can produce justifiable fears for personal safety and for the safety of family and friends, likely affecting a Black person’s ability to focus at work.
- **Doubts about belonging.** Given the history of covering noted earlier, Black colleagues may wonder how their reactions to, and experiences around, recent events will be perceived by non-Black colleagues, amplifying doubt around belonging. Such doubt can distract from their ability to perform and may hinder their ability to proactively seek the support they need from colleagues and leadership in times of crisis.
- **Uncomfortable or hostile work environment.** Colleagues and leaders who are not educated on racism or specific events may create discomfort or hostility through formal and informal communications, often in the form of microaggressions.¹⁹ For example, a colleague may express, “I wonder what [the victim of a recent murder] was doing. There has to be more to the story,” which can be interpreted as, “there may be information that would justify the murder of this human being.”



L.E.A.D.: A framework for organizations to take action today



The robust attention, conversation, increased trauma, and activity across the world sparked by recent events demands that organizations take immediate action to meet the needs of the Black workforce and Black community. Yet, the sheer quantity of possible organizational responses to support Black people both inside and outside the workplace during these particular moments of public crisis can be overwhelming. Rather than an exhaustive list of recommendations, the framework below, Listen, Engage, Acknowledge, and Do—or L.E.A.D.—offers four areas on which organizations can focus when crafting the best possible response for its specific culture, values, and workforce.

Importantly, while the L.E.A.D. framework addresses a need borne out of a specific moment in US history—a product of US-based racism—many of these considerations are relevant globally and for other marginalized communities.

► **LISTEN.** Organizations may be anxious for answers and eager to take swift action without fully understanding the breadth of current challenges. Organizations that listen may:

- Provide forums for Black coworkers to share stories with one another, validating for the Black workforce that others have similar experiences to their experiences.
- Create safe space to process emotional trauma caused or surfaced by recent events.
- Encourage non-Black leaders and workers to educate themselves, instead of only relying on Black colleagues for education.
- Provide platforms for Black members of the workforce to share stories with the entire workforce, elevating Black voices and helping non-Black workers understand the impact of recent events on members of the Black community. Sharing stories should be optional, and there should be opportunities to share anonymously.
- Solicit input from a variety of Black colleagues—not just senior leaders or headquarters-based workers.
- Take care to not add burden to Black coworkers, understanding that Black colleagues may be very emotionally raw and may not want to share feelings or insights.
- Create avenues for Black employees to provide input on communications and other tactics, while also understanding and accounting for the additional emotional labor and burden that may be placed on them by putting the onus on the Black community to “solve” current challenges or “educate” others.

► **ENGAGE.** Workers of many races and other identities may seek to engage in conversation to spark learning and action. Organizations that engage can consider exploring:

- Whom to bring together. Considerations may include: Small or large group? By location, division, shift, or level? Should the group include, for example, only members of the workforce who identify as Black, Black coworkers with other people of color, or a mix of all racial identity groups? Should business resource groups (BRGs) and/or inclusion councils engage in planning, facilitating, and/or participating?
- Who will lead the conversations. Are they knowledgeable about Black history, racism, antiracism, and the recent race-based violence against Black people by police and vigilantes? Will they have adequate facilitator guides, training, and support to lead productive, respectful conversations that don't lead to more pain or burden for Black coworkers?
- What content will be provided to participants before, during, and after to support productive and impactful conversation. This may include, for example, providing the workforce with the tools to identify and combat microaggressions and other biases.
- When and how frequently conversations will happen (hint: this should be an ongoing discussion).
- Where is a physically and emotionally safe place to bring workers together, and what technology will support the appropriate level of participation.
- Why conversations are taking place, and how to communicate those objectives. Engagement can provide a platform for listening, learning, and/or solutioning.
- How will the organization create a safe space for vulnerability, connection, and learning, including what tools (physical or technological) will help to facilitate this. Prepare to address any potential work-related concerns or incidents, if raised.

► **ACKNOWLEDGE.** For many years, organizations and workers avoided discussing race and ethnicity in the workplace due to discomfort or fear; times are changing. Organizations that acknowledge might:

- Say something. Workers, customers, and other stakeholders demand acknowledgement of recent murders and other events from a CEO and other key business leaders; silence is not an option because it can imply support for the status quo. The workforce may also expect acknowledgement from team leaders.
- Speak quickly. A timely response can demonstrate attentiveness and care.
- Be specific and authentic in communications. Watering down the message with generalities or cliché can set the wrong tone.
- Establish and adopt consistent definitions for key terms (see Key Terminology for some suggestions) to create a shared language to discuss recent events and racism more broadly.
- Name the victims of race-based violence, understanding the impact this can have, specifically in the Black community.
- Recognize and openly communicate that Black coworkers may not be OK; they may be distracted and feel overwhelmed.
- Create time and space for Black colleagues to process, grieve, and heal, such as offering mental health counselors or providing more frequent breaks or mental health time off.
- Admit that anti-Black racism “can happen here,” and there is a need to address the treatment of Black people in the workplace and beyond.
- Use data to transparently drive accountability and communicate progress on any inequities facing the Black workforce.

► **DO.** Many workers expect their employers to not only say something, but to do something—and urgently. Such actions may uniquely benefit the Black workforce and community—given the current environment—but similar actions may also benefit other marginalized communities. Organizations seeking to “do” something can:

- Coach leaders to support their Black team members, with specific resources and tools for those who need it.
- Provide tools and resources for all workers to support their Black colleagues.
- Educate the workforce about diversity, equity, inclusion, bias, microaggression, and racism in pursuit of building antiracism as a workforce capability.

- Form or strengthen BRGs or other identity-based groups, creating pathways for the Black workforce to seek support from the organization and one another and opportunities for allyship from other workers.
- Support the economic well-being of the Black community through investment in businesses, purchasing services from, and establishing partnerships with Black-owned businesses.
- Support and partner with racial equity organizations (such as nonprofits and museums)—and other organizations that advance diversity, equity, and inclusion with meaningful donations and time. Conduct necessary research to verify that beneficiaries align with the organization’s values and legitimately support the Black community.
- Evaluate internal policies, processes, practices, and culture with a lens of racial equity.
- Consider how targeted programming (for example, recruitment, sponsorship, and leadership development) for Black individuals can supplement broader culture and process changes in pursuit of expanding the Black workforce.
- Evaluate products and services through a lens of racial equity.
- Identify specific actions and commitments to pursue racial equity now and in the long term. Set goals, transparently communicate those goals, and establish mechanisms for accountability. Development of such commitments should consider the perspectives of, but not solely rely on, Black coworkers.

As organizations and leaders better support Black colleagues amid the racial injustice that has surfaced today, this is also an opportune moment to commit (or recommit) to diversity, equity, and inclusion as both business and social imperatives longer-term. As part of the system that has historically advantaged some groups of people over others, organizations can now play a meaningful role in dismantling organizational and societal systemic racism in pursuit of equity for all.

Building on the momentum sparked by current events, it is important to note that diversity and inclusion (D&I) or diversity, equity, and inclusion functions and leaders will need access to executive-level decision-making, C-suite sponsorship, and ample people and budgetary resources to drive meaningful change. Organizations should also set (or further emphasize) expectations that diversity, equity, and inclusion are top organizational priorities. The considerations identified above should just serve as a starting place. To drive and sustain change, organizations will need long-term, holistic, evidence-based diversity, equity, and inclusion strategies that integrate perspectives from and meet the needs of the Black workforce, Black customers, and the Black community.



Inclusive leadership is a start

While organizations craft strategies to best support Black members of the workforce, every individual can also contribute to fostering belonging and promoting equity for Black colleagues. Research shows that inclusive leaders demonstrate six signature traits: commitment, courage, cognizance of bias, curiosity, cultural intelligence, and collaboration.²⁰ By cultivating and practicing these behaviors, leaders can foster a more inclusive workplace for Black workers—both today and in the long term.

Inclusive leadership is not, alone, a sufficient step for individuals—both those traditionally called “leaders” and every member of the workforce—to take in pursuit of antiracism; however, in the workplace, inclusive leadership can provide an immediately actionable starting point to set the foundation for long-term, sustained behavior change.

1. Demonstrate **commitment** to supporting Black colleagues—right now and moving forward. Inclusive leaders:

- Commit to being aggressively antiracist—that is, active opposition to racism by advocating for changes in political, economic, and social life.
- Vocally communicate what they stand for (or against) internally and externally. This can include communicating perspectives, policies, practices, and laws that impact the Black workforce.
- Consistently check in with and support Black coworkers. Build authentic relationships with members of the Black workforce, champion Black colleagues, and leverage political capital to provide meaningful opportunities and sponsor Black talent throughout the talent life cycle.

2. Have the **courage** to do better. Inclusive leaders:

- Acknowledge the personal limitations of a non-Black individual to fully understand the experience of a Black individual.
- Speak up when they hear or see potentially harmful words or actions toward Black colleagues (or anyone!).
- Understand that Black history, feelings, and experiences are not open to debate, and say so when necessary. Someone’s lived experience or feelings are not opinions to be deliberated.

3. Be **cognizant** about Black coworkers’ experiences and perceptions. Inclusive leaders:

- Pursue truths. Before speaking, writing, quoting, or reposting, they verify legitimacy of information.
- Seek to recognize their own part in negative experiences for the Black workforce, remembering that doing nothing or staying silent perpetuates racism. They use assessment tools and feedback to drive their own awareness, action, and accountability on potential biases toward Black colleagues.
- Craft plans to proactively demonstrate allyship in times of crisis and every day.



4.

Be ever-**curious**. Inclusive leaders:

- Prioritize learning about Black history, the history and manifestations of systemic racism, and significant relevant events.
- Embrace traditionally uncomfortable conversations around adverse impacts on the Black community, racism, and inequities and listen to stories about Black workplace experiences if colleagues want to share.
- Seize opportunities to connect with Black colleagues inside and outside of the workplace—such as innovation sessions, dinners, sporting or cultural events, shared causes, and celebrations.

5.

Build **cultural intelligence** around current events. Inclusive leaders:

- Demonstrate sincere interest in learning about Black cultures and cultural contexts.
- Create safe space for Black colleagues to uncover their identities in the workplace, broadening traditionally narrow definitions of “professionalism” (e.g., attire, hair, speech, and accent).
- Consider how communications and culture often privilege White and Western language and behavior—and change it.²¹

6.

Collaborate with the Black workforce and allies. Inclusive leaders:

- Engage with Black colleagues across levels, roles, and geographies to solve important business challenges and address critical organizational priorities, understanding and acknowledging the incremental value that Black perspectives bring.
- Partner with allies to share the burden during times of crisis so that Black colleagues experiencing trauma can engage in self-care.
- Engage ally networks and/or inclusion councils to be part of solutions to improve the Black experience.

Immediate organizational action and the practice of inclusive leadership are only starting points to tackle a system of challenges that seeks sustained attention and support. Diversity, equity, and inclusion work is both an art and science, requiring patience and a multifaceted, evidence-based approach aligned with an organization’s unique business strategy. However, regardless of the specific approach taken by each organization, this unique moment in history demands increased attention on supporting Black coworkers—immediately and moving forward—to create true change for Black colleagues and for us all.



Appendix

Key terminology

The key terms below can help leaders navigate conversations around supporting the Black workforce and systemic racism. Shared language can help facilitate fruitful dialogue and spark progress.

Allyship: The intentional and consistent practice of supporting members of a marginalized or mistreated group to which one does not belong.²²

Antiracism: The conscious decision to make frequent, consistent, and equitable choices to be conscious about race and racism and take actions to end racial inequities in our daily lives.²³

BIPOC: Acronym for Black, Indigenous, and People of Color, a term used to unite people of color while acknowledging the marginalization that Black and Indigenous people face.²⁴

Black: Black is a racial identity—both externally imposed and externally constructed—used to describe both those who identify as Black and/or African American.²⁵

Black Lives Matter: Black Lives Matter is an organization, a movement, and a rallying cry to affirm all Black lives along the gender spectrum until there is a world where Black lives are no longer systematically targeted for demise. It does not mean that **only** Black lives matter or that Black lives matter more than other lives; instead, it means that Black lives are in particular danger and demand focus and attention to solve for severe inequities.²⁶

Civil unrest: A gathering of three or more people, in reaction to an event, with the intention of causing a public disturbance in violation of the law. Civil unrest typically involves damage to property or injury to other people. Peaceful demonstrations and protests that abide by the law do not constitute civil unrest.²⁷

Equity: Fair access for people and groups, with consideration for their unique barriers or privileges, creating an equal opportunity for success.²⁸

Privilege: A right, immunity, or benefit enjoyed only by a person (or people) beyond the advantages of most.²⁹ The concept of privilege refers to any advantage that is unearned, exclusive, and socially conferred.³⁰

Microaggression: A comment or action that subtly and often unconsciously or unintentionally expresses a prejudiced attitude toward a member of a marginalized group (such as a racial minority).³¹ An example of a microaggression is “You are smart, for a girl.”

Racism: The belief that a particular race is superior or inferior to another, that a person’s social and moral traits are predetermined by their inborn biological characteristics.³² Racism can manifest in individual, interpersonal, institutional, and structural racism and together form a system, which is often referred to as “systemic racism.”³³

Systemic racism: A form of racism expressed in the practice of social and political institutions. It is reflected in disparities regarding wealth, income, criminal justice, employment, housing, health care, political power, and education, among other factors.³⁴

Resources

There are innumerable resources available to learn more about the history of systemic racism, talk to children about race, and learn about what individuals can do. The short list of resources below highlight material that can be particularly useful in navigating dialogue and strategies to support Black coworkers and navigate anti-Black injustice in the workplace context.

Books:

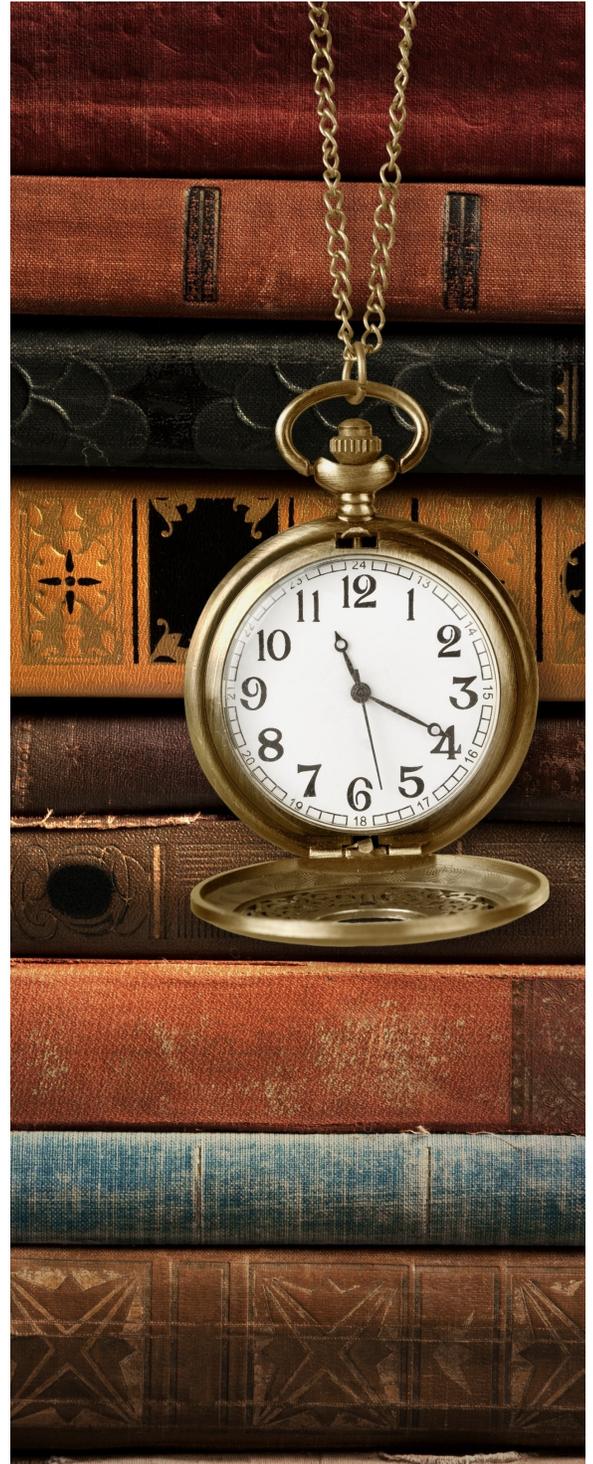
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Articles:

- [How To Build an Actively Anti-racist Company](#) by Jenni Avins
- [Steps Companies Can Take to Make the Workplace Better for Black Employees](#) by Trudy Bourgeois and Julia Taylor Kennedy
- [Your Black Colleagues May Look Like They're Okay—Chances Are They're Not](#) by Danielle Cadet
- [Why Work Microaggressions Are the Worst—and How to Deal with Them](#) by Maggie Craddock
- [6 Steps to Building A Better Workplace for Black Employees](#) by Dina Gerdeman
- [The Bias of Professionalism Standards](#) by Aysa Gray
- [African American Inequality in the United States](#) by Janice H. Hammond, A. Kamau Massey, and Mayra A. Garza
- [What It Really Mean to Be an Anti-Racist and Why It's Not the Same As Being An Ally](#) by Hillary Hoffower
- [How to Be an Ally if You Are a Person with Privilege](#) by Frances E. Kendall
- [Guidelines for Being Strong White Allies](#) by Paul Kivel
- [Toward a Racially Just Workplace](#) by Laura Morgan Roberts and Anthony J. Mayo
- [How Companies Can Advance Racial Equity and Create Business Growth](#) by PolicyLink
- [Why So Many Organizations Stay White](#) by Victor Ray
- [US Businesses Must Take Meaningful Action Against Racism](#) by Laura Morgan Roberts and Ella F. Washington

Podcast:

Intersectionality Matters! with Kimberlé Crenshaw



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